

Review of Peter Gay's
Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider

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Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider. by Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001 (first published 1968). 224 pages. Illus. ISBN# 0393322394. \$13.95 Paperback.

In the preface Gay lets the reader know right away that this book is a mere *öessayö* on the culture of the Weimar Republic. He states: *öI have not written the complete history of the Weimar Renaissanceí ö¹* It would be hard to expect any author to cover every aspect of a whole culture, much less a culture shared by millions over the course of 14 years. Yet Gay does a magnificent honor to the cultural history of this important but short lived experiment in Western culture on the whole by going into detail about the main figures who brought about the legacy of the Weimar Republic; people like the Mann brothers, Wassily Kandinsky, Erich Mendelsohn, Stefan George, etc. In fact, Gay's *öessayö* is close to being a complete history of the Weimar years, spanning its pre-republic roots right up to the chancellorship of Hitler. Gay also includes a handy political history summery at the end of the book that allows the casual reader the chance to parallel the cultural and political developments of this most interesting period.

Rather directly, Gay writes: *öthe Weimar style was born before the Weimar Republic.ö²* What he means by this is that the artistic, architectural, and literary culture of the pre-war years were already well on their way to maturity. Without question, the First World War did put its own marks on the artistic movements that were underway, but the spirit of the Weimar years was born before the war according to Gay. Writing about 1914 expressionism, Gay states: *öEverywhere young artists broke away from the pomposity of academic art and sought to rise above the bombast of their surroundings to cultivate their inner life, articulate their religious yearning, and satisfy their dim longing for human and cultural renewal.ö³* It was after the war though when artists of all sorts would be allowed to express these feelings, and because of the war, these expressions took dark and sometimes odd forms. For example, Martin Heidegger and others like him who Gay tells us had a *öI love affair with unreason and deathí ö⁴* these feelings would be some of the hallmarks of German expressionism in the post war years.

Gay makes it clear though out the book that the Weimar culture is an intellectual culture obsessed with pushing boundaries. It was a world of big names and avant-garde thinkers that unfortunately alienated the majority of the German population. Gay lets us know that underneath this intellectual veneer, long established political and social divisions coupled with financial disaster were leading the Republic to its downfall as the 1930's came along. Furthermore, national socialists would capitalize on the strictly intellectual culture and use it to further deepen the cracks.⁵ Being that many of the intellectuals, artists, and politicians who made up this Weimar culture were Jewish like the painter Max Liebermann and statesman Hugo Preuß, Nazis also capitalized on the anti-Semitic leanings of the larger part of the population to further the concept of *Dolchstoßlegende* or the stabbed-in-the-back myth to win more seats in the Reichstag.⁶ Reasons such as these and others are what led Gay to believe that the reasons for the collapse of the Republic lay in its very foundation. Gay concludes his first chapter with this metaphor: *öNot content with inviting the Trojan horse into the city, the men of Weimar watched*

¹ xiv.

² 5.

³ 4.

⁴ 82.

⁵ 137.

⁶ 19.

over its construction and solicitously sheltered its designers.⁷ In other words the freedom, excesses, and toleration the Republic allowed set the stage for opposing groups to gain power.

Weimar Culture does an excellent job at describing the high culture of the Republic, but Gay is careful to always plant the seed of political unrest through all these activities whether they be social commentaries by the great writers of the time, or expressionist paintings and film. Perhaps Gay is guilty of looking at the Weimar Republic as something that was bound to fail, a very easy thing to do in such cases, but by exploring the work and personalities of the people that have come to represent the Republic to cultural history, Gay does accomplish a well rounded history of Germany's democratic experiment.

⁷ 22.